ISLAMIC DIRECTIVES OF

INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

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DOI: 10.29370/siarj/issue4ar11
Link: https://doi.org/10.29370/siarj/issue4ar11

ABSTRACT:

Interfaith dialogue is an endeavor of the followers of different religions to recognize the common phenomena in various religions in a bid to proceed towards the common goal of communal harmony. The objective of interfaith dialogue is to create mutual understanding and respect to work in unity for peace and prosperity of humanity without harming the identity of any religious group in multi-culture societies. It is believed that every religion has some universal values which can serve as a common ground with other religions. Islam, as a complete code of life, guides us in this regard too with clear directives. The Islamic directive is to engage in interfaith dialogue and cooperative relationships with the people of other faiths on the basis of what they have common between them as religious injunctions aiming at the betterment of society. We are living in a globalised world, with diverse religious, ethnic, cultural, social, economic and political backgrounds. The followers of various religions need to learn how to live together like members of one united big family in this small global village of ours, known as the world. All these aspects suggest the importance for a better understanding one another through interfaith dialogue. The aim of this paper is to discuss all the possible ways to strengthen interfaith dialogue to resolve inter-religious conflicts and to restore harmony and peace in the light of Islamic directives. This paper also explores the role of Islamic directives to find a common theological

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platform with adherents of different faiths to create a better and peaceful pluralistic society.

KEYWORDS: Interfaith Dialogue, Islamic Directives, Peace, Harmony, Peaceful coexistence

Introduction:

Interfaith dialogue tries to harmonize the feeling, emotions, and understanding between the people of different faiths in such a way that encourages building relationships on the common features of their faiths, such as brotherhood, love, compassion, tolerance and mutual respect. Interfaith dialogue promotes intercultural values and peace-building initiatives to lay the foundation for peaceful coexistence, harmony and brotherhood. Peace and progress are the preamble of practical scheme of the Islamic principles as laid out in the noble Quran. The Quran is a dialogue between the Divine and human being. This glorious book addresses all the people of all the times in accordance with the degree of their understanding and development. It is a book that teaches human beings the eternal principles of mutual respect, honesty, justice and equality, which are the required foundation for peace and tranquility in the world. Interfaith dialogue is an endeavor of the followers of different religions to recognize the common phenomena in various religions in a bid to proceed towards the common goal of communal harmony.

What is Interfaith Dialogue?

Interfaith dialogue is an exchange of ideas, opinions, thoughts, and cooperation to foster a mutual understanding between the people of different faiths and reach solutions for common problems. Any effort which aims to develop mutual understanding among the people of different faiths on the basis of common grounds is called interfaith dialogue. Interfaith dialogue is a communication between two believers at

the religious level. It is another name for walking together towards the truth and working together on the matters of common concern.[1] Dialogue refers to the inherent capacity and trait to listen to, to argue reasonably, agree to disagree, and negotiate without losing self-confidence, temper, patience and dignity, as it is a peaceful, tolerant, civilized, humanistic, and most importantly, religious approach towards negotiations in order to find solutions to issues of divergent nature, conflicts, disputes and confrontation. In summary, the term dialogue is popularly understood to mean inviting people to come together with respect and open- minded for exchanging ideas. To exchange of ideas means moving from being in hostility to be friendly.

Islam not only enjoins dialogue, but also promotes it in a good manner so that a humanistic and spiritual truth of the former is understood along with the noble concerns of the other faiths. The word "dialogue" in Arabic is *al-hiwar* which is meant to seek peaceful solutions to problems of humanity. If peace in the society is an obligatory objective, then, the means to the realization of the objective are also obligatory.[2] Interfaith dialogue addresses all these issues and tries to find an amicable solution to them. Interfaith dialogue is a creative encounter, and interface, of an attempt to understand the people of other faiths.

Philosophy of Interfaith Dialogue:

The goal of interfaith dialogue is to establish an ideal society, where people have compassion for the suffering of others, where people care for each other, where they do not hurt each other, where the system of production and distribution are humane, rational and ethical. The immediate and the short-term goal is to reduce tension which is rampant in the society and to create a humane society in the long-run. Interfaith

dialogue is a practice of engaging in conversations with another person's with an ultimate end goal of achieving understanding, fostering relationships, and gaining mutual respect. It is a particularly helpful course of action if we wish to avoid a clash of civilizations.[3]

The Islamic Approach for Interfaith Dialogue:

Fourteen centuries ago, the Quran made the greatest ecumenical call that the world has ever seen. The Quran addresses the people of the books and says: Say, 'People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God.' And if they turn their backs, say: 'Bear witness that we are Muslims.[4] This statement calls all people of books to come to common terms. In case this call is not adhered to, Muslims are to adopt the attitude expressed in another verse. "Your religion is for you: my religion is for me".[5] The Quran wants dialogue to be an opportunity for truth to emerge rather than the opening of a door to harm the sentiments of the people who do not share their beliefs. The Quran and prophetic tradition enjoined Muslims and as well as the followers of other faiths to engage in meaningful dialogue, cooperation and agreement on common principles. This is what the Quran calls as "a just word of common ascent".[6] Peace treaty of Hudaibiyah in the history of Islam was a result of successful dialogue of this kind. The treaty was signed despite divergent views of people. Interestingly, the Holy Quran called this peace process as the greatest victory. The Prophet of Islam (P.B.U.H) at Hudaibiyah agreed to enter a ten years peace treaty with the people of other faiths. As per this treaty, it was agreed that the Muslims and non-Muslims will not harm each other and in the shade of this agreed security protocol they shall be free to

follow their own religion with none of them oppressing the other. The companions of the Prophet (P.B.U.H.) did not want to remove the words *Messenger of God* (P.B.U.H.) from the treaty. The Prophet (P.B.U.H.) himself removed it from the treaty as the unbelievers were not ready to accept him as Messenger of God. It is important to keep in mind that he was far more powerful than the combined strength of all the unbelievers at that time but he preferred to go with peace treaty and agreed to their all conditions unconditionally for the sake of peace.

Islamic Directive of Interfaith Dialogue:

The Holy Quran, as explained above, has laid down the foundation of interfaith dialogue. There are verses in the Quran encouraging the believers for such religious dialogue. The principle of universalism which is the essence of the Islamic message is not possible to realize without a sincere openness to others. The models of dialogue in the Quran are stated very clearly. The Quran says: "Say, O, Mohammad! O, people, come to a word that is common between us and you, that we worship none but God, and that we associate no partners with Him, that none of us shall take others as lords beside God, then , if they turn away, say: "Bear witness that we are Muslims".[7] The Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) has no responsibility for what people choose form themselves but his mission, aim, and objective was to reveal and explain the religion in a manner that was most beautiful.[8] God is kind to everyone and His mercy is for all humanity.[9] Interfaith dialogue is today's necessity to restore peace and harmony in the world. Islam meets all the requirements needed for inter-faith dialogue. Dialogue has not only been an important principle in Islam, but the Holy Quran has also stipulated that it should be conducted in the best possible manner[10] and based on good arguments.[11] God has mentioned frequently

the cases of dialogue between His messengers and their opponents and has advised Prophet Mohammad (P.B.U.H) too to engage in dialogue with people.[12] This verse gives provide evidence for necessity of upholding the dialogue and establishing the principle of peaceful coexistence. The Prophet of Islam (P.B.U.H.) started his mission with dialogue and argument.[13] Islamic scripture and theology both converged on the point of interfaith dialogue. Hence theologically Islam is fully supportive of interfaith dialogue. The following are some of the verses that direct us to interfaith dialogue:

a) "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong. So whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah has grasped the most trustworthy handhold with no break in it. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing."[14]
b) "Say 'O Muhammad! to the believers to forgive those who (harm them and) hope not for the days of Allah that He may recompense a people, according to what they have earned."[15]
c) And insult not those whom they worship besides Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge."[16]

These Quranic verses obviously claim that Islam not only approves interfaith dialogue for its adherents but also earnestly urges the people of other religions to come forward for the sake of peace and tranquility and engage in inter-religious dialogue. It is interesting to note that Islam is the only religion whose scripture directly calls for interfaith dialogue. The Quranic teachings serve as laudable points for affecting interfaith dialogue and fostering understanding between believers of different faiths. This is an adequate guideline for Muslims to carry out the task of such a dialogue. In order to make interfaith dialogue possible and successful, we need to

ponder on the true meanings of these verses of the Quran and the traditions of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H.).

The Prophetic Example of Interfaith Dialogue:

The Prophet of Islam always advocated peace – be it half ul fuzool, Sulah hudaibiyyah, conquest of Makkah or his other endeavors. One of the most prominent examples of his peaceful nature is in *Hijra* (emigration) to Madinah Al Munawarra, the then *Yathrib*. It was in adherence to this principle that the Prophet of Islam left his hometown, Makkah, in the thirteenth years of his prophethood. The community *"Ummah"* that the Prophet established in Medina comprised not only of Muslims but also the Jews who lived with them in Medina. The Prophet himself articulated and implemented the Quranic demand of peaceful co-existence with the followers of other faiths. The Prophet envisioned the Jews as being an important component of Medina community and outlined the rights and obligations of the Jews of Medina. The constitution states, "Whoever of the Jews follows us has the same help and support as the believer, so long as they are not wronged by him and he does not help the enemies of Muslims. The constitution also states the Jews of *Banu Áwf* are community along with the believers, to the Jews their religion, and to the Muslims their religion. This applies both to their clients and to themselves, with the exception of anyone who has done wrong or acted treacherously; he brings evil only on himself and on his household". Another set of the document states that between the Jews and Muslims is sincere friendship and honorable dealing. Such terms indicate the basis of a pluralistic society that the Prophet envisioned, a society that fully implemented the Quranic pronouncement of peaceful coexistence with followers of other faiths.

Interfaith Dialogue for Peace in Islam:

The meaning of the term 'Islam' is peace. Islam is a religion of peace, not only by name but also in terms of what its principles are all about. How to live together in peace and create a healthy society? Islam provides a complete system and code to achieve this. It is a religion that advocates peace and brotherhood among all human beings as all of them have a common forefather, Adam A.S. Islam urges us to embrace the principle of dialogue and to cooperate and coexist in peace with others, and promote understanding, peace, accord and good values among people. It asserts that true and honest living is an assured way for spiritual and social harmony, and for protecting the long term self interests of every human being. The verses quoted above show that Islam always has been keenly interested in solving the problems of people living in multi-religious communities as was the case in Medina, where such problems were resolved in an exemplary way by spreading the message of peace, justice and safety to all. This message is to be conveyed to the people through an invitation to dialogue as clearly indicated by the Arabic word *"ta álu"* come togather. Islam orders its followers that faith and religion is not impossible.[17] Apart from the Quranic call for interfaith dialogue, we also find specimens of religious dialogue from the life-stories of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. The Charter of Madinah set for the citizens of Madinah state and the Treaty of Hudaibiyah made with the people of Makkah are two important documents that testify for their dialogic life. In Madinah, all people irrespective of religions had equal rights to enjoy a happy, peaceful life under the jurisdiction of this charter. On the other hand, Prophet of Islam abandoned the title *"Rasulullah"*

"Messenger of God" while writing the Treaty of Hudaybyiah (with the disbelieving people of Makkah only for the sake of peace and harmony.[18]

Religious Plurality in Islam:

The Holy Quran encourages the believers to disseminate religious values to others and declares a great reward for those who dedicate themselves to the propagation of this timeless religion. The most important thing that the followers of every religion must do in order to peacefully co-exist in a society is to learn to respect the religion of others. Sometimes, incorrectly understanding the principles of religion can be as harmful as waging a war against its very basics. The most important thing is that the followers of every religion must not hurt the susceptibilities of the followers of other religions. The foundation of a pluralistic society, its culture, legal system and educational growth require acceptance of common values. Islam identifies categorically with the people who possess the earlier revelations and promulgates that to each nation has been sent the Prophets. It is believed that God sent around one lakh and twenty four thousand prophets in different periods of history for the formation and nurturing of righteousness and goodness in society. The basis of religious freedom in Islam is the Quranic assertion that 'there is no compulsion in religion'.[19] Islam regards religious diversity as one of the *(ayat)* sign of God. True guidance is now distinct from error.[20] There are a number of similar verses in the Quran which make it very clear that one's choice of religion is wholly a matter of individual choice and no one can force anyone to choose a particular faith. The diversity and differences in ethnic and human communities is normal and should only result in nurturing mutual understanding and cooperation among them. The Holy Quran

indicates that the differentiation, within mankind in respect of gender, tribe, and race is also a source of knowledge.

The Concept of Mutual Respect in Islam:

Islam teaches us to respect every man who is good whatever his religion may be, and to be drawn towards merits and virtues whatever be the religion or race of the person who possesses them. All human beings are creatures of God. The Holy Quran emphasizes that all the people have right to follow the religion of their own choice. In Islam, all human beings are brothers and sisters. It calls on people of different faiths to have mutual respect for each other on the basis of their common humanity while following their own religion. According to Islam, the life of human beings is a trust from God, irrespective of his or her ancestry, color, or language. Humankind is the best of all creations[21] and is created in best of the forms. So, every human deserves respect by nature.

Tolerance: Islam is a religion of peace and tolerance. Peace can never be established without tolerance. Tolerance and dialogue are two keys to establishing peace and harmony in the society. Tolerance means to accept coexistence, firstly, and, then, to coexist peacefully. Islam calls for tolerance in a number of verses in the Quran and announces great rewards for those who are among the *sabireen* (the patient). God orders the believers to be patient at the time of anger and to excuse those who treat them badly. Dialogue increases the understanding of various culture and factions within the multi-cultural societies. With a continuing dialogue and peaceful dealing, humans learn to reduce their prejudices, increase tolerance, and correct their misconceptions. The Holy Quran is strongly emphasizes on the principles of forgiveness, tolerance and respect for the entire humanity. Tolerance towards the people of other faiths always was

one of the fundamental teachings of Islam. The Holy Quran says. “Let there be no compulsion in religion.[22] A person who understands Islam and its teachings can never be a terrorist or extremist. Islam undoubtedly encourages humankind to cooperate on the basis of justice and a peaceful life. One of the most important principle of Islam to promote peace is non-interference.

Justice: Justice is the most cherished ideal dream in every society. Justice is universal to every member of human family. That’s why we find that Justice is the central theme in the Quran. The Holy Quran is known as al-Furqan that means the deferential sources between truth and injustice which tries to vindicate the evils to create justice in the society. Quran gives the noble ideas to harness a peaceful world order based on equality, respect, dignity of honor and justice. In the Islamic world view, justice denotes placing things in their rightful place. It also means giving others equal treatment. In Islam, justice is also a moral virtue and an attribute of human personality. Justice is close to equality in the sense that it creates a state of equilibrium in the distribution of rights and duties, but they are not identical.

Equality: Islam sees all human beings as the creatures of God. All people are equal and enjoy the same degree of humanity. Equality between people should be regardless of their race, colors, creeds and cultures. God says: It is He who created you from one soul and created from it its mate that he might dwell in security with her. And when he covers her, she carries a light burden and continues therein. And when it becomes heavy, they both invoke Allah , their Lord, "If You should give us a good [child], we will surely be among the grateful." [23] The differences between people in terms of their tribes, races and lineages is not something

to fight for, but to know each other. God said, "O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know each other.[24] In fact, Islam is a religion of blessings, kindness and tolerance for all humanity without any differentiation and discrimination.

Human Values in Islam:

Fundamental philosophy of Islam revolves around universal humanity. Islam always encourages its followers to live with tolerance, harmony, love, brotherhood and peace on the earth. God has granted human beings dignity which is for all mankind and not just for certain people. The Holy Quran says."And indeed we have honored the children of Adam, and We have carried them on land and sea and We provide them with *At- Tayyibat* (good things) and have preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preferment.[25] It is narrated that a Jewish funeral passed before the Prophet (PBUH) and he stood, some of his companions said it is a Jewish funeral. He replied: Is not it a soul of human being? All humanity is a single body. This also means that all human kind is a family of brother and sisters who are equal before God. Islam teaches us to harmonize our relation and adhere to the principle of peaceful co existence with all human beings irrespective of their faiths, religions and ideologies. It clearly emphasizes upon rationality in dialogue. The other people are to be revered and talked to in rational and responsible way to exchange the ideas. The Holy Quran has alluded to the unity and solidarity of human beings in their humanity and considers the saving of one life to be the same as saving all lives and to transgress one is to transgress all: "Because of that, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption [done] in the

land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. And our messengers had certainly come to them with clear proofs. Then indeed many of them, [even] after that, throughout the land, were transgressors.[26] Mankind has not been divided by Prophets and holy scriptures but by their pride and prejudice. We must accept the reality of pluralism. We must stress on commonalities and enrich each other's traditions and cultural values. Dealing with respect and positive engagement does not mean that differences in doctrine and interpretation do not matter. Rather, it means that those differences must be addressed through a free and open dialogue. It is this open, free, and dignified dialogue that allows the followers of various religious traditions to affirm their diversity and discuss their similarities and differences, and this is what Islam requires from its followers. We ought to do what we can to maintain that diversity and not bring our evolution to a stalemate by allowing it to disappear merely for the sake of coexistence.

Unity in Religious Diversity:

Diversity is a beautiful and wonderful creation of God. But this diversity is for identification and not for any superiority. No Arab is better than a non-Arab and no non-Arab is better than an Arab. No white is better than the black and no black is better than the white. Superiority is only for those who are best in character and are most righteous. Islam preaches human brotherhood and forbids discrimination on the basis of religion, caste, color and creed etc. Interfaith Dialogue is an effort to recognize the principle of unity. The interfaith dialogue would help remove mistrust and suspicions from the minds of believers of different religions and boost world peace and unity. The most important thing that the followers of every religion must learn is to practice their religion in such a manner that

it does not restrict the free practice of religion by people of other faiths. All Scriptures are gifts from the Lord and we ought to believe in all the scriptures that the Lord sent down for the guidance of humanity. We believe in what has been revealed to us in our book and you believe in what has been revealed to you in your book. For us is our religion and for you is yours. Don't follow what you don't know. There is no compulsion in religion[27]. People can resolve their disputes with the help of the Quranic directives.[28] Love is also strongly emphasized in Christianity and among the Sufis, who called it Ishq. Nonviolence is strongly emphasized in Hinduism and Jainism. Compassion is more emphasized in Buddhism. Equality and justice are more emphasized in Islam. Just as coexistence is valued in Hinduism, similarly, it is valued in Christianity, Islam, and other faiths. If differences arise, they do so as a matter of rationale and not of actual practice. The goal of coexistence is achieved in Hinduism through co-recognition, while in Christianity and Islam, it is achieved through mutual coexistence. It is ultimately the people who have to deal with one another and must finally decide all crucial issues. Let the people of the world assert their sense of understanding and unity. In essence, we have to convince each other that there is something greater than our differences and distinctiveness which binds us together and that is the principle of unity. Let us admit that similarities and commonalities do exist among all faiths. However, there is consensus that the most fundamental values common to all religions are love, nonviolence, equality, justice, human dignity and compassion.

Conclusion:

The violence and extremism have become a cross-border global dilemma. What the world needs today is an acceptable formula for the

attainment of religious harmony. Living in harmony is the common aim of all religions. Making peace among the people is one of the basic aims of Islam. Peace and harmony constitute the soul of Islam. Islam stresses its followers to explore every possible avenue for peaceful negotiation to sort out the conflicts among people and put efforts in order to establish peace in society. The Holy Quran appeals Muslims to engage in constructive dialogue with people of other faiths on the basis of what they have common in doing righteous deeds. We review the specific advice offered in the Quran on how to engage in interfaith dialogue with the people of other faiths. Better argument is synonymous to positive and constructive dialogue. The Quran is a dialogue between the Divine and human. Hence, there is a dire need to know and understand the Islamic directives to strength inter-faith dialogue in order to overcome the inter-religious conflicts in various parts of the world so that creative peace can be established on the earth.

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